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Johnny Weissmuller and the Old Global Capitalism: The Federal Blueprint for Selling American Culture in the 1920s and 1930s

In his recent book, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*, Walter LaFeber proclaims that the former Chicago Bulls basketball star has become the icon of a new world system, revered by Buddhist monks in Mongolia as much as he is by children on American playgrounds. LaFeber makes Jordan and modern sport one of the linchpins of a new global capitalism that has profoundly transformed the modern world. LaFeber dates the rise of this new system in which American sports and other cultural products are marketed around the world by an army of entrepreneurs to the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

“That face and that body became as well-known in Outer Mongolia as on Michigan Avenue or Broadway and Forty-second Street,” wrote another American student of American culture and global markets more than forty years before LaFeber, referring not to Michael Jordan, but to Johnny Weissmuller. Paul Gallico’s homage to America’s most famous Olympian of the 1920s and Hollywood’s Tarzan of the 1930s and 1940s indicates that LaFeber’s thought-provoking analysis might have some chronological problems. In fact, the effort to globalize American culture through sport as the first step in a program to prepare the world for American products began long before Michael Jordan and the NBA, Phil Knight and Nike, and Ted Turner and CNN dreamed of new athletic empires. Also, corporate America did not pave this path alone. Like so many other huge economic endeavors, the American government was a willing partner in opening these new markets.

By the 1920s the United States had become the world’s most powerful economy. American industrial and technological prowess sparked “fables of abundance” that dazzled global audiences. America seemed to much of the rest of the world a model of energetic productivity and bountiful consumption that beckoned the rest of the globe to follow in its powerful footsteps to a future of comfortable plenty. The United States had not only

become the world's industrial giant, it had also become the leading exporter of culture. From forms of cinema to fashions in music to styles of sport, American popular culture exercised powerful influences on the rapidly modernizing societies of many of the post-war world's nations. American business and political leaders believed that in order for the rest of the world's cultures to consume American abundance they would have to Americanize their cultures. American entrepreneurs and government agents wanted to help the world do precisely that. Using structures and ideas constructed during the First World War, a combination of public and private agencies during the 1920s and 1930s marketed American lifestyles around the world.

In the 1920s and 1930s, American athletic promoters, business leaders, and government officials used the Olympic Games to promote the export of American culture. They thought that success in the Olympic Games and other international sporting events would advertise the virtues of American national culture and create a worldwide frenzy of emulation. As the president of the American Olympic Association, Colonel Robert M. Thompson, proclaimed in the 1920s, the basic purpose for sending American expeditions to the Olympics was to "sell the United States to the

Decades before the alliance of technology, capital, and American sport culture identified by LaFeber swept over the globe, American Olympic leaders and federal government bureaucrats crafted the blueprint for this cultural and economic conquest. In 1929, after a decade of lending American Olympic expedition ships for travel, stocking the American Olympic team with athletes, coaches, and trainers from the military, sending a high-ranking military leader to Europe as the commander of an American Olympic team, and using State Department and Foreign Service resources to smooth political problems that American Olympic teams encountered, the federal government and the American Olympic hierarchy embarked on their most ambitious campaign. With the Olympic Games of 1932 scheduled for an American home, the U.S. Departments of Commerce and State launched an ambitious program to collect data from "developing" nations around the globe to assess "native" sporting traditions. The purpose of the study was to seek ways in which the United States could use sport to Americanize foreign cultures and to open

new markets for manufacturers of American sporting goods – and other products – as the Great Depression began to ravage the American economy.

How did government officials and American Olympic movement potentates plan this operation? What information did they gather about foreign markets and sporting traditions? How did this program fit into the larger American campaign to spread American culture, and American capital, through the world in the period between the World Wars? What does this program reveal about American ideas in regards to sport, politics, and international relations in the interwar years? These questions form the heart of this inquiry.